The World of Letters As Others See It

The Most Exciting Novel.

I HAVE often been asked this question: What is the most exciting novel you have ever read? The answer is not difficult. I have been thrilled by "The Three Musketeers," "Treasure Island," "The Adventures of Captain Horn"; but the most exciting novel I have ever read is "The Wings of the Morning," by Louis Tracy. It opens with a shipwreck, and from the first word in the first chapter to the last word on the book's last page it never lags or sags. I will guarantee this story to all convalescents; and as an anæsthetic for railway travel it is effective.—*From "As I Like It." By William Lyons Phelps in Scribner's Magazine.*

* * *

The French Paper Covered Novel.

IN France years ago Mme. Sand became aware of the popular tendency to gravitate toward good literature when it is to be had, and she took the publisher Levy almost literally by the ear and forced him into the experiment of giving France cheap paper bound books. From that day to this such books have been the staple of French publishing. The business has been organized on the scale set by cheap paper bound books. French publishers are diligent as ants in bringing out the latest thing in trash; their shelves are full of it. But side by side with the trash, in perfectly fair and free competition with it—the same price, same paper, typography, binding, everything scrupulously the same—they keep a full line of the very best books in the world.—*From "A Reviewer's Notebook" in the Freeman.*

* * *

Kipling Sales.

AUTHORS like Mr. Rudyard Kipling can afford to smile at the commotion caused whenever some rising novelist takes the town by storm. "When it comes to the world's best seller," said one of London's leading booksellers yesterday, "there is probably no one to compare with Rudyard Kipling. Year in, year out, it is the same with all his books, whole stacks of which we sell every day." The new Kipling anthologies have helped to swell the load this season—the selection of verse has already gone to a second edition—and there will soon be added to it the same author's record of "The Irish Guards in the Great War," which is something more than the history of a famous regiment.—*From the London Times.*

* * *

Tales of Bygone Years.

IN like manner, after I had feasted on the hinted but untold horrors of Henry James's "Turn of the Screw," I looked high and low for the "Green Tea" of Sheridan Le Fanu, for the tales of Fitz-James O'Brien and for Jean Richepin's "Morts Bizarres." Nor could I find Mrs. Oliphant's "Little Pilgrim" or her "Beleaguered City." Once I had a rich collection of tales such as the Fat Boy in the "Pickwick Papers" would have reveled in, tales that "would make your flesh creep." As it is, I must go to bed shiverless, with no hope of a nightmare, despite my former ownership of a nest of them. It is small consolation that I have at last laid hands on Bayard Taylor's delightful "Diversions of the Echo Club" and on Frederick Beecher Perkins's "Devil Puzzlers." What do these trovers profit me if all their lovely companions are faded and gone? Unlike the Cheshire cat, they have faded away and not left even the grin behind them—*From "Books I Have Loved and Lost." By Brander Matthews in the Outlook.*

* * *

Again the Censorship Question.

ARE we going to have a censorship of printed books? Is it necessary to regulate all our mental food as it has been found necessary to supervise physical food? Even the most ardent advocates of license in writing would not, I suppose, disapprove of the pure food law—in other words, no one has a right to manufacture and sell any food he pleases. For it is unfortunately true that there are plenty of men who would sell poison if they could make a legal profit by doing so. Their zeal has to be regulated. And although authors and publishers are as a rule respectable persons, there are plenty of both who would be willing to sell corruption to adolescents if they were not prevented by law. Is the soul less important than the body, or is freedom to injure the mind more precious than freedom to injure the health? The question is not so simple as all that. I do not agree with those who say immoral books hurt no one; I think they hurt every one who reads them, provided the reader is a normal human being with any imagination. The difficulty is to find the right censor, probably an impossible task.—*From "As I Like It." By William Lyons Phelps in Scribner's Magazine.*

* * *

Nearing the Danger Mark.

THE phallic novels of our day also illustrate disproportion. Mr. Lawrence's books, of which I have written elsewhere, are powerful in this genre, and contain admirable qualities which this definition does not touch. My point is that in his novels, and in the stories of, let us say, Waldo Frank or Ben Hecht in this country, the urgency of sex is so immediate in every thought and action that the thing becomes an obsession. The genre has reached its climax in the "Ulysses" of James Joyce, an extravaganza of erratic genius in which literally hundreds of pages are driven into an insane indecency by an obsession with inflamed or perverted sex that hurries the author away from proportion, away from coherence and very far away from art. Subtle studies result, but also an emotional intensifying of life which is often wearisome and sometimes distressing. The phallic novel at its worst is no more valuable as a transcript of life in the round than a study of dipsomaniacs in a private sanatorium.—*From "Sex in Fiction." By Henry Seidel Canby in the Century.*

* * *

Literary Earnings Again.

EACH year we see old records shattered and new ones established. To-day the altitude record for returns upon literary endeavor appears to be held by the reported $400,000 paid to Lloyd George for his forthcoming memoirs. Mr. William Hohenzollern is at present the "runner up" with a record variously reported from $150,000 to $240,000, paid for his literary attempt to prove himself an apostle of peace surrounded by misled and misguiding counsellors. From this the man in the street may roughly estimate that a Prime Minister still in power may be valued as the equivalent of two kaisers in retirement, but this conclusion does not throw great illumination upon the value of the work of contemporary litterateurs, whose reputations have been gained solely by their pens, without the aid of the sword.—*From the Christian Science Monitor.*

* * *

Mark Twain's Middle Name.

IN the month of March, 1870, on the occasion of Jane Lampton Clemens paying a visit to the home of her daughter, Mrs. Permelia Moffett, in St. Louis, the mother of Mark Twain made the following statement to several of her relatives: "My son Sam was named Samuel Lampton Clemens, after my uncle in Kentucky, one of the best men I ever knew. I named Sam after him to perpetuate the memory of a good man." Why Mark Twain discarded the Lampton from his name and substituted Langhorne was never explained. As a boy he was plain Sam Clemens. As a youth he was Sam Clemens. As a miner and newspaper man in California he was likewise simply Sam Clemens. His first book, "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County," published in 1867, bears simply the name of Mark Twain as the author. On the title page of his second book, "The Innocents Abroad," published in Hartford, Conn., in 1869, appears Samuel L. Clemens, the initial "L." being used for the first time.—*From "The Genesis of Mark Twain." By W. M. Clemens in the Biblio.*

* * *

Where Woman Is Inferior.

THE conclusion seems to be that the inferiority of woman's position in the kingdom of poetry cannot be attributed to the circumstances of age long subordination, out of which she has but recently emerged. These conditions might have hampered the free development of women in the poetic as in other spheres, but it is unreasonable to suppose that genius itself could have been so totally quenched by any external circumstances. As in the case of Burns or Keats, the genius of the poet springs up with a will to live that the most untoward surroundings are powerless to deny. It will find adequate means of expression for the feeling that reacts from its contact with an alien world, and for the thoughts within, which are born in music. We must, therefore, hand on the problem to the psychologists, for so far as the past is concerned there is something in the normal constitution of women, either a lack of poetic sensibility itself or an incapacity to express adequately what is felt, or perhaps an instinctive aversion from self-expression, which can alone account for the fact that woman, equal to man in many ways and superior in some, is so markedly his inferior in poetry. — *From "On Women Poets" in the Contemporary Review.*

* * *

Examine the Check.

WRITERS inexperienced in the business side of their work frequently are so elated at receiving a magazine publisher's check that they hardly look at it further than to note the amount for which it is drawn. With a glow of pride they indorse the glamorous instrument, and they are by so much richer than they were before. "The Dial" in 1917 with much vigor pointed out to the unsophisticated writer the advisability of his scrutinizing the fine print which may be on his check, just above the place for his signature. He cannot indorse the check without signing what is there presented as an agreement. Later he may have an opportunity profitably to dispose of the book rights, foreign rights, translation rights, dramatic rights, or film right to the work for which, it may be, he has received from the magazine a pittance. The editor produces the canceled check and shows him that he has disposed of all rights. Rex Beach one time wrote a keen little skit on this subject in the form of a scenario ("founded on fact") and entitled "It Happens Every Day."—*From "The Practical Side of Writing." By Robert Cortes Holliday in the Bookman.*

The South Sea Man Again

Review By GEORGE S. CHAPPELL.

ATOLLS OF THE SUN. By Frederick O'Brien. The Century Company.

LOVERS of sunshine the world over will bask in the radiance of Frederick O'Brien's recent book, which completes a delightful trilogy with his previous "White Shadows" and "Mystic Isles." Every author, I think, expresses throughout his work some certain quality which is the dominant one. There will be many qualities, to be sure, but some single one will run like a thread through the others. In the case of Frederick O'Brien, I can only think of this quality as literary sunlight, a clear, sparkling attitude of mind, which is never clouded by moral misgivings or mental vapors.

I picture him as the kindliest and best of fellow travelers, a companion who takes life gayly, with a deep reverence for its beauties, an exceeding love for his fellow creatures, and a fig for pretensions. There is more than a glint of Irish independence shining between the lines of this engaging writer, but never the slightest trace of ill-nature or censoriousness.

The reader of this review may ask, "But what has all this to do with a book of travel?" Well, it seems to me that a book of travel is the next best thing to travel itself. For many it is the only possible substitute. And the author becomes actually one's companion in that close companionship of the imagination. It is the personal element, the character of the author, which makes a book—or a trip, for I can only think of it as such—merely interesting or endows it with the plus quality of actual affection for the man who wrote it, the pleasant feeling which comes over one occasionally of "Well, bless my soul, I like this man I'm with!"

In this new volume Frederick O'Brien is distinctly his likable self. As literature it seems to me his best. Perhaps nothing will ever equal the furore caused by the "White Shadows," but it must be remembered that that was our first real taste of O'Brien and we liked it a lot. I am by way of becoming an O'Brien addict. Most travel books, I must confess, bore me almost to tears. The traveler so seldom knows how to write. But in Frederick O'Brien we have that amazing combination of a world wanderer who is at once vagabond, poet and accomplished literary gentleman.

His route through the atolls takes us to the fascinating southern group, the Paumotu or Dangerous Isles; those tiny circlets of coral and palm which are planted in every schoolboy's mind during his first ventures in geography. Through the mouths of several graphically figured acquaintances we hear the strange stories of Pitcairn and Easter islands, those far away mysteries which it is given to so few eyes to see, the mention of which invariably causes a stay-at-home's heart to swell with a desire to get out there, somehow, by hook or crook—and of course the author swings back eventually to his beloved Marquesas, which as seen through his eyes, we, too, begin to think of as home.

We renew our acquaintance with several old friends, Lying Bill Pincher, McHenry, the faithful Exploding Eggs and Vanquished Often, and we meet a number of new notables whose portraits are struck forth with a few crisp, fresh strokes in the salient style so characteristic of the author. The book is a living, breathing thing, full of live people and bristling with events. No doubt they did not all happen in sequence exactly as narrated. The author says as much in an exquisitely written foreword which cannot be bettered.

"'Atolls of the Sun' is a book of experiences, impressions and dreams in the strange and lonely islands of the South Seas. It does not aim to be literal, or sequential, though everything in it is the result of my wanderings in the far and mysterious recesses of the Pacific Ocean."

Frederick O'Brien understands that a book of travel to be read must attract by virtue of things actually happening in the book. There must be something doing. He does not stint his measure of wonders, filling each chapter generously with hairbreadth escapes from shattering reef and towering whirlpool, exciting fishing expeditions, battles with giant devilfish, tornadoes and flashing flights to lonely islets, such as Rapa Nui.

And what amusing people we meet! native and foreign, the gaunt dignified Paumotans, the gracious, laughing Marquesans, and the picturesque Polynesian polyglots of every race.

True? Every word of it, I'm sure. True in the most important sense, the spiritual sense. For this O'Brien is more than a dull recorder of facts; he is an artist with an imagination and in this latest book he adds another to his amazingly vital pictures of the South Seas.

Mr. Clinton W. Gilbert has finally emerged from his obscurity as "Author of 'Behind the Mirrors'." His publishers have announced that his anonymity is now at an end. Mr. Gilbert has for the last few years been Washington correspondent for the Philadelphia Public Ledger.